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Tarangini Sriraman, *In Pursuit of Proof: A History of Identification Documents in India*

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1 Against a history of ID documents that defines them only as products of the State, Tarangini Sriraman, historian and political scientist, shows how such documents are co-products of the State and its subjects, the citizens. In so doing, she distances herself from a classical and Eurocentric history of ID documents, defined as "a unique subset of bureaucratic writing," which considers them only from the perspective either of the Enlightenment or of a history of domination (Sriraman 2018:26). On the contrary, she draws upon a history of "reciprocal relations between the power of the State and the power of the civil society" and of the materiality of the documents, i.e. their embeddedness into the everyday life that they are supposed to represent (Lau 2006; Hull 2012). She dedicates special attention to the marginal groups whose relationship to the State is the most difficult. She also locates her research mainly in the urban environment of Delhi, because the capital city has been and still is the place of many critical events (she uses the formulation coined by Das in 1995) with deep implication in the identification of people. It has been "the nerve center of colonial wartime rationing, postcolonial refugee rehabilitation efforts, housing and large-scale planning drive(s), and a laboratory for Emergency austerity measures" (Sriraman 2018:54). Moreover, it is a (quasi) State where the rate of enrolment for Aadhaar, the new digital ID, is among the highest.

2 From a methodological point of view, the book consists of two intertwined parts; one being a historical approach, the other a multi-sited ethnography. It may therefore be termed an ethno-historical approach. It presents the great value of shedding light from a long-term perspective on contemporaneous phenomena, without sacrificing their accurate, thick description.

3 The first four chapters are the most historical ones. They rely first on archives, including the National Archives of India, two State Archives (Delhi and Maharashtra), the India Office Records in London, as well as documents from the Central Secretariat Library and the Nehru Memorial and Museum Library. Chapter 1 deals with the 1940s and 1950s, a crucial period characterized by the Second World War, political dissidence, the Partition, and electoral preparation. It shows "the wartime crystallization of the ration card into an indispensable administrative marker of family and residence, as well as the material significance of ration cards in real and imagined encounters of corruption implicating cardholders and petty and high-ranking officials" (Sriraman 1918:60). Chapter 2 discusses the Licence Raj in the domain of food rationing. Resting also on interviews with in-charge and retired officials in the food supply sector, it challenges the popular idea of a Licence Raj characterized only by venality showing how these officials bridged the gap between rules and a society "saturated by emotion-laden practices of kinship and ritual" (Sriraman 1918:60). Chapter 3 focuses on the documents of the Partition's refugees. It shows that authorities had to accept "collateral evidence" that emerged from the makeshift documents and narrated itineraries of refugees and their organizations. An official document existed, the Refugee Card (RC), but it was not realistic for the authorities to ignore the other proofs of identity produced by the refugees. Chapter 4 tells the history of the "V.P. Singh Card," an ID card distributed from 1990 onwards to the inhabitants of slums in order first, to do away with identity and residence proof as prerequisites for receiving an ID card, and second as a means to identify beneficiaries of housing policy. This chapter relies on the aforementioned archives, as well as on an ethnography conducted between 2011 and 2013 in Govindpuri, the Delhi slum area where V.P. Singh announced the policy demonstrating how in the absence of previous clear proof of identity, officials relied on extra-documentary, aesthetic, material and affective practices of counting and verifying families and their dwellings.

4 Chapter 5, "The Document in the Digital," is dedicated to an ethnographic inquiry into the enrolment process of Aadhaar and the possible uses of the digital ID by those who succeeded in getting it, as well as the consequences for them. It relies mainly on two types of fieldwork over a period of 10 months, firstly in the Inter-State Bus Terminal (ISBT) near Kashmiri Gate in Delhi, where 168 porters work and are regrouped in a Union, and secondly in two Aadhaar enrolment centers in north Delhi. Interesting materials, both website documents and interviews with officials, also come from the Unique ID Authority of India (UIDAI) the Delhi Department of Food and Supply, an NGO trying to help the porters and newspaper articles. This diversity of sources allows a crossing of perspectives, as exemplified at the beginning of the chapter, which shows extracts of interviews from an official of the UIDAI, a porter and a computer operator of an enrolment center. The author thus succeeds in making a multi-leveled ethnography, i.e. showing the competing points of view of the State agency which launched the policy, that of the public targeted by this policy, and the perspective of the street-level bureaucrats who implement and therefore embody the policy

(Dubois 1997; Lipsky 1980). This chapter shows first that the production of the dematerialized ID was only possible through a first immersion of the officials into "intensely material acts of verifying applicants and authenticating their ID documents" (Sriraman 1918:63). In so doing, and by reminding the reader that the UID provides thereafter a cloud-based authentication to third-parties, it confirms that this digital ID may provide an all-in-one authentication, therefore providing what one may consider, if it works, a public good in the economic sense of the term. Second, this chapter shows that while the porters had their own forms of ID tied to their work, the UIDAI "for a long time and until very recently, refused to recognize any of these alternative narrativizations of identity."

5 This book confirms, in the area of identity and residence documents, that every power relation is bi-directional, according to the classical Weberian definition. Power is exercised not only by the more powerful—here the State whose agents may or may not issue the identity cards required to get access to welfare schemes—upon the less powerful—here the people or "enumerated" as the author calls them. Power is also exercised by the less powerful, the people, who sometimes manage to get their own definition of their identity accepted. Therefore, the definition of identity is not decided by one party, but rather negotiated between them through iterative interactions.

6 This book also decisively shows that the leeway within the ID application process is historically conditioned. After the shock of the Partition, the refugees could use not only the official Refugee Card to make their claims for welfare, but also their own documents (like employment letters or cards from refugee associations) and their own narratives. Would-be beneficiaries of ration cards during wartime and slum dwellers seeking access to subsidized food in the 1990s could still use their personal documents and stories to get their rights recognized, although to a lesser degree. With the digital ID, as the author puts it, "the turn to biometric verification threatens to compromise the post-colonial possibility of privileging popular forms of evidence" (Sriraman 2018:53). It represents a reinforcement of the power of the State that reduces the space for flexibility in the process at the individual level.

7 Some parts of the text could gain in being less allusive, especially the introductory ones, for instance the sentence: "Through both their [ID documents] presence and their absence, they raise specters of surveillance, welfare, fraud, terrorism, illegal refugee crisis, and urban disorder" (Sriraman 2018:28). Or what does "a rapidly shifting matrix of caste and regional politics," without any further precision exactly mean (Sriraman 2018:63)? On the contrary, the ethnographical parts are very clear and enlightening.

8 Although it is extremely well documented with interviews and archives of actors from sides, officials and inhabitants, one may regret the quasi-absence in the ethnography of descriptions of interactions between them (for an example of such descriptions, see Dubois 1997); for instance during Aadhaar enrolment. Relative to this registration period, one would also have been very interested in learning about the other part of the digital ID-related operations, namely when people try to prove their identity using the so-called "Aadhaar-Based Biometrical Authentication" (ABBA). One does learn a great deal about the issues surrounding the enrolment process, but not much about the origins, digital architecture and implications for civil liberties and welfare programs of the new ID (for more elements about these aspects, see for instance Khera 2019).

9 Concerning the theoretical references, one may be a little surprised with the treatment given M. Weber and M. Foucault, two founding fathers of the historical analysis of power issues. In one of his most-quoted works, M. Weber (1919:128)wrote that bureaucrats are supposed to act "without anger and passion" the expression of which indicates by its simple existence that bureaucrats are also ordinary people that sometimes do feel anger and passion, but have to overcome them in order to preserve impartiality. In contrast, a number of other commentaries on Weber's work insist on the supposedly non-emotional behavior of bureaucrats. The author only quotes a close variation of Weber's formula, coined by other people, and interpreted in this new sense (Sririman 1918:60). She goes on to assert that emotions have been forgotten by Weber and that it is now time to bring them back in the analysis. However, a careful reading of Weber, rather than of those who reference him, might have helped her find those emotions where they have always been. The Weberian analysis of bureaucracy is not emotion-blind (also apparent in a survey of Weber's general sociology, as Eurocentric as it is), but is about how the State or the organization tries to deal with the emotions of its agents. In the same vein, one of the great contributions of this book, as mentioned above, is to empirically show that in the "ID realm" the power relation between the State and the people is bi-directional, but this idea can already be found in Weber's definition of power relations as bi-directional, although at a more theoretical level. Concerning Foucault, the author rightfully mentions the mistakes he made, as explained by a number of historians, and his partial omission of the importance of family relations, but she seems to miss his global approach to the historical transition from punishment to surveillance (Foucault 1975). In *Surveiller et Punir*, Foucault presents descriptions not so different in their aim from Sriraman's around ID documents showing how people may encounter the power of the State and of its agents or technical devices. The proximity of the stance of the author with Foucault's should not be underestimated. Significantly, the author acknowledges the link with the Foucaldian governmentality analysis, but all her references to Foucault in the bibliography come from second-hand analysis or from a *Foucault Reader*, and none from his original master-works such as *Surveiller et Punir*. Had the author directly read Weber or Foucault, she would probably have been less severe with them, as she ends up with very similar conclusions on power relations as the former, and using, as a tool for analysis, the same kind of empirical description as the latter.

10 On the whole, this book is a must-read in the realm of the social sciences of identification papers and identification issues, for South Asia in particular and from a global perspective, alongside books from Lau (2006), Hull (2012), Noiriel (2007) or Breckenridge (2014).

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